

Testimony by Jack Bryant, President of the Stamford NAACP

In Support of SB 280

March 14, 2012

Chairman Fox, Chairman Coleman, members of the Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity today to testify. My name is Jack Bryant and I am the President of the Stamford NAACP. On behalf of my branch, I am here to testify in favor of SB 280. I urge the committee to pass this bill and finally end the death penalty in Connecticut.

The NAACP and our local chapter have opposed the death penalty for many years. A recent event, however, has galvanized our membership to make repeal of the death penalty a priority: the execution of Troy Davis.

This case gained national and international attention, and raised grave doubts about the death penalty in the US. Davis was convicted of the 1989 murder of an off-duty police officer in Savannah, Georgia. No physical evidence connected him to the murder. His conviction rested entirely on the testimony of nine eyewitnesses. After his original conviction, the case against him unraveled. Seven of the nine eyewitnesses recanted their testimony – some alleging police coercion – and said they never saw Davis commit the murder. Only two eyewitnesses stood by their testimony: the person who many believe is the actual shooter and another eyewitness who was too far away from the crime to have seen the face of the shooter.

With all the doubt surrounding Davis' case, over a million people petitioned the state of Georgia to stop the execution. Yet these pleas fell on deaf ears. This past September 21, the state of Georgia executed Davis.

This was not justice. Georgia put finality above making sure innocent life is protected and never taken through an execution. I hope, however, that this case is a turning point for our country. The National President of the NAACP, Ben Jealous, summed up this hope best:

"Troy's execution, the exceptional unfairness of it, will only hasten the end of the death penalty in the United States. The world will remember the name of Troy Anthony Davis. In death he will live on as a symbol of a broken justice system that kills an innocent man while a murderer walks free."

This past fall I had the opportunity to meet Davis' sister, Kimberly Davis. She had come to Stamford to call for an end to Connecticut's death penalty. I was amazed by her strength and courage. After her brother's death, she continues to fight for an end to the death penalty. She knows that her brother will not be the last Troy Davis – as long as the death penalty remains in place, innocent individuals will continue to be executed.

No matter how much we try to deny it, mistakes happen in the criminal justice system, including in Connecticut. End the death penalty this year so that Connecticut never has its own Troy Davis.